

MYSTERY & SUSPENSE

MAGAZINE

N°08 - FALL 2022

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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

**A VILLIAN TO CHALLENGE
THE HUMAN IDENTITY**

.....
**Feature: Dual Perspectives in
Mystery and Suspense**
.....

**Author Q&As: Mark Greaney,
Clare Mackintosh, Lee Child &
Andrew Child, and more**
.....

**Feature: Mysteries and Thrillers
Inspired by Real Events**
.....

**Short Fiction:
"A Permanent Solution"**
.....

**Reviews: *Upgrade*, *Hell Town*,
Wake, *You're Invited*, and more**

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From action adventures to sci-fi to procedurals, it's the perfect time to find something new you'll love.



Sam Boush
Editor-in-Chief

This issue has a little bit of everything. For the sci-fi thriller lover, there's a great article on AI in fiction. For the action adventure aficionado, look no further than our interview with Lee Child and Andrew Child. For the devotee of D.C. drama, we have a political thriller feature that intersects nicely with true crime. And if you're into procedurals, former police officer (turned bestselling author) Clare Mackintosh might be your first stop.

There's so much more, whether you're into horror, crime, or suspense. This issue covers all the bases (or maybe dog-ears all the pages?). In any case, we hope it gets you in the mood for reading, no matter what genres you love most.

Thank you for supporting the authors we love. Here's to hoping this fall is the perfect season for you to find a cozy spot to read a mystery (maybe even a cozy!) or whatever you enjoy.

Happy reading,
Sam

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WRITER'S DIGEST



OPENING KEYNOTE SPEAKER



ATTICA LOCKE

Attica Locke is the award-winning thriller writer of five novels. Her work includes Edgar Award-winning *Bluebird*, *Bluebird*; *Pleasantville*, the winner of the Harper Lee Prize for Legal Fiction; and *The Cutting Season*, winner of the Ernest Gaines Award for Literary Excellence. Locke works as a screenwriter as well. Most recently, she was a writer and producer on Netflix's *When They See Us* and the Hulu adaptation of *Little Fires Everywhere*.



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Mark Greaney
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Mark Greaney

#1 New York Times bestselling author Mark Greaney’s debut international thriller, *The Gray Man*, was published in 2009 and became a highly sought-after Hollywood property. Greaney is also the bestselling author or coauthor of seven Tom Clancy novels, including his most recent, *True Faith and Allegiance*. He collaborated with Tom Clancy on three Jack Ryan novels before Clancy’s death in 2013.

INTERVIEW BY ELISE COOPER

Q. *The Gray Man* has now been made into a movie and was recently released on Netflix. Can you tell us about it?

Mark: It stars Ryan Gosling as The Gray Man, Court Gentry, and was released on July 22. I read the script when they started filming. I have also seen it and really liked it. They did change some things. With so many people involved in making the movie, there are always creative influences. Characters who were not in the first book, but did come along later in the book series, are introduced in the movie. It is true to the spirit of the longer story of the first book. The dialogue was clever for the story.

Q. How did you get the idea for *Armored*, your latest book? Will it be a series?

Mark: Yes, it will be a series. The idea came about when I was training in a school with firearms. This school trained a lot of civilian contractors. There, I took a lot of classes that were designed for executive protection. It had a lot of running and gunning with team tactics. I thought in 2009 about writing a story about these contractors. First it was an audio play, and now the novel has come out.

Q. What can you tell us about contracting firms like *Armored Saint*, which appears in *Armored*?

Mark: Some are not loyal or supportive to their employees. The one I created in this book, *Armored Saint*, is corrupt and dirty. Overall, the contractors themselves are awesome. Some of these companies have a reputation, which I wanted to dance around a bit. In the 2000s, it was the heyday for these companies, and now things have dried up.

Q. How would you describe Joshua Duffy, the book’s protagonist?

Mark: Very much a blue-collar worker. Not at all like *The Gray Man*, not a secret spy, a superhero, or Special Forces. But he was not a mercenary because he seeks justice. In the beginning of the story, he is not a leader, but a helper. When he

lost his limb, he was depressed at the inability to financially support his family. But as a strong family man he was responsible and caring. He has the desire and guts to get back out there, even with the loss of a limb. Very courageous.

Q. How would you describe Nichole, Duffy’s wife?

Mark: She was a captain in the Army, flying helicopters. I wanted to write her as an alpha female. She is very assertive, someone who takes charge. She is the opposite of Duffy, who is very easygoing. I think she wants to go back to the world where she was a leader, her natural habitat. Overall, she is straightforward, no nonsense, and detailed.

Q. In *Armored*, Duffy goes up against Mexico’s notorious drug cartels. How did you research the cartels?

Mark: I wrote a *Gray Man* book, *Ballistic*, where Court faced off with the cartels. I found out through the research how much torture and violence there is. I could not put that in the books. It is a civil war in Mexico, the Mexican Marines versus the cartels, who are brutal to the townspeople. There are rivalries between the different cartels and actual maps show what territory is held by which cartel.

Q. What role did Dr. Gabrielle (Gabby) Flores play?

Mark: I spent some time in the archeological museum in Mexico City where Gabby works. As I was writing the story, I realized that many of the contractors were American, French, British, and in a world they did not understand. Gabby became the character, the heart and soul of the story, that

allowed me, through her, to tell the story of the setting and the hardships the people face. She preached to the contractors the danger in the area and how desperate the people living there are.

Q. How would you describe Dr. Flores versus UN representative Michelle La Rue?

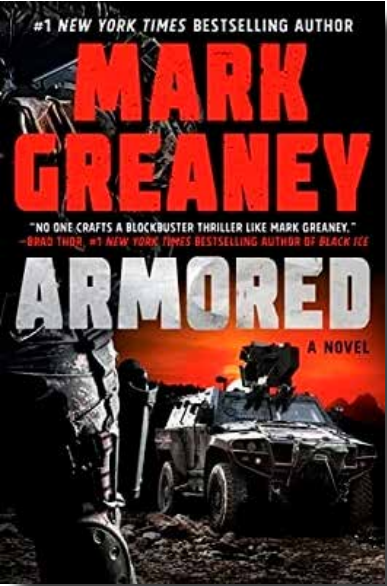
Mark: Gabby is a realist, caring, honest, and direct. La Rue is a UN bureaucrat who overestimates her abilities and influence. She is an allegory for the UN going into places and doing things, trying to be peacekeepers. Through La Rue I was able to put in my own personal bias. La Rue has a naiveté and a jadedness at the same time, especially when she wanted the contractors to disarm in a very dangerous setting.

Q. What are you working on next?

Mark: I have written two books a year since 2009: the Clancy series, *Red Metal*, of course *The Gray Man*, and now this series, *Armored*, where I will probably start to write the next book in August. *Armored* has been optioned by Sony, with Michael Bay producing it. The second *Armored* book will have a strong dynamic between Duffy and Nichole, co-leads.

The next *Gray Man* book is titled *Murder*, the twelfth in the series, out in February next year. Zoya will be back with Zack probably in the latter part of the book.

Red Metal II written with Lt. Col. Hunter Ripley Rawlings will be out before the next *Armored* book.



Mark Greaney’s latest: *Armored*

Joshua Duffy is a Close Protection Agent—a professional body-guard—and he’s one of the world’s elite operatives. That is, he was until his last mission in Lebanon. Against all odds, Josh got his primary out alive, but the cost was high. Josh lost his lower left leg.

There’s not much call for an elite bodyguard with such an injury. So, Josh has to support his family working as a mall cop in Jersey. For a man like Josh, this is purgatory on earth, but even in Paramus, miracles occur.

A lucky run in with an old comrade promises to get Josh back in the field for one last job. The UN is sending a peace mission into the Sierra Madre Mountains in Mexico, an area so dangerous it’s known as *Espinazo del Diablo* (“The Devil’s Spine”). Only a fool would think they could broker peace between the homicidal drug cartels in the region—and only a madman would sign on to keep those fools alive.

JAUDUAL PERSPECTIVES

**Luring the reader into the
minds of multiple characters**

BY LINDSEY LAMAR

Harvey Dent isn't the only two-face in the storytelling community. While the infamous comic book character might be the first one surfacing to your mind (or half of it), the idea of unfolding a story through dual perspectives has a long and strategic history.

Dual perspectives in mystery and suspense stories often have two lines in the water, both catching the same fish. And if you don't get hooked twice, chances are you just haven't read deep enough yet.



WHERE IT BEGAN

Two is a common number in the literary world. That's because stories thrive on duality. At a subconscious level, you already know this. Generations aside, the good versus evil point of view is one you've probably been reading as long as you've been literate.

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz by L. Frank Baum was a wildly successful novel written in 1900. It would be nearly a century before Gregory Maguire came along and told the same story from a dual point of view in a work that would go on to win acclaim and press for its outstanding creativity. And while *Wicked* stands alone as an outstanding piece of art, the story would not have existed without its parallel predecessor.

Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mister Hyde*, first published in 1886, is another classic that carved a permanent seat at the dual perspectives table. It became one of the first novels to marry unreliable narration with duality—a concept unheard of at the time that is still analyzed and respected today. The success of Maguire and Stevenson came from the primal understanding that duality done right creates an irresistible story.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF DUAL PERSPECTIVES

The novel labeled “dual-perspective” is often stereotyped as two characters telling their version of a story until they eventually overlap. This isn't the worst way to label dual perspectives, but there's room for improvement once we're aware of the vast spectrum. Mystery and suspense authors worldwide have achieved acclaim by creating a variety of binate narrators. The most common is taking two characters living in the same timeline and dividing them by world. This is typically done by dipping into the same linear plot from a new set of eyes.

Lisa Gardner's *Find Her* is a highly rated thriller that uses this method to dip between viewpoints of a missing person and a detective assigned to the case. This choice in narrators is compelling because even when the switch is flipped between the two, the timer for each character is ticking away. While the narrators work toward different goals, you can feel a sense of urgency as each page turns.

A slightly deviated example of this duality is keeping narrators accessible across different timelines within the

same plot. A clear example is Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*. Although the married narrators live in the same plot of Amy Dunne's disappearance, Flynn chose a partially nonlinear timeline in which the novel begins with past journal entries of the abducted woman while simultaneously flipping perspectives to her husband's present-day whereabouts. Flynn eventually brings the story back into a linear fashion nearing a major twist in the work. Many can agree, the carefully executed duality in *Gone Girl* was magnetic.

Another semi-frequented approach to duality is having characters exist in almost entirely different worlds, leaving the reader to guess about their grand intervention. *An Anonymous Girl* by Greer Hendricks and Sarah Pekkanen executes this beautifully as the reader finds themselves in constant anticipation of an explanation at every twist and turn until the eventual click-moment of a woman's intersectionality with her own therapist.

THE MOTIVES BEHIND DUAL PERSPECTIVES

Evoking an emotional response is very important to any author, which is what makes dual perspectives so successful. If not a question of “Where is this going?” it's a question of “Why is this going?” Twofold storytelling leads readers down a winding path of miniature physiological warfare, which is why it is so popular in suspense fiction. Given any narrative, the reader attempts to place themselves in the story as early as chapter one. Having multiple character viewpoints, espe-

cially conflicting ones, creates a decision point for the reader, who must decide who they will trust and why. Add an unreliable narrator or two, and it quickly becomes an addictive frenzy for the reader who is constantly left guessing.

When Paula Hawkins wrote *Girl On The Train*, she was no stranger to this concept. Here, she carries the stories of three women, rather than just two. Hawkins wrote one of the characters to be an alcoholic, which lessened the reader's ability to trust the point of view at all. By doing this, she brilliantly juxtaposes the reader's emotions against the narrative by allowing room for judgements to thrive. This choice in perspective gave Hawkins plenty of space to create gaping holes in the contrasting perspectives without the reader wavering, since an emotional response was already barricading them from salient details. Because of the bullet-proof strategy Hawkins created in her narration, the novel's twists and turns smoothly transitioned into a satisfying payout.

The beauty of dual perspective stories everywhere lies in bringing the reader into multiple characters and what they identify as their own corner of the world. As the reader gets to know each character's corner, the author slyly removes the walls that built each protagonist's hideout with an underhand, brick by brick, until the two opposing characters sit facing one another in an unexpected and climactic tension point. Their comfortable separation is unraveled in ways we, as readers, don't often expect. However, the clever construction and deconstruction leaves us relishing in the narrative—twice as satisfied.



About the author

Lindsey Lamar is a twenty-four-year-old mystery and suspense author. Her debut arson-thriller, *Better Off Guilty*, released in April 2021. Lindsey is passionately dedicated to her latest works and the literary community she finds herself home in.

Learn more about Lindsey at lindseywritesbooks.com.



Clare Mackintosh
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Clare Mackintosh

With more than two million copies of her books sold worldwide, Clare Mackintosh is the multi-award-winning author of *I Let You Go*, which was a *Sunday Times* bestseller and the fastest-selling title by a new crime writer in 2015. It also won the Theakston Old Peculier Crime Novel of the Year in 2016. Her second and third novels, *I See You* and *Let Me Lie*, were #1 *Sunday Times* bestsellers. All three of her books were selected for the Richard & Judy Book Club. Clare’s subsequent novel, *After the End*, was published in 2019 and spent seven weeks in the *Sunday Times* hardback bestseller chart.

Q. Your latest, *The Last Party*, kicks off with a New Year’s Eve party that ends with a man dead in a lake. What is this mystery all about, and where does it take us? And who is DC Ffion Morgan?

Clare: *The Last Party* is a classic murder mystery with Agatha Christie vibes, set in the UK, on the border between England and Wales. The border runs right through the middle of a lake: on the Welsh side is a small town—the sort of place where everyone knows everyone—and on the English side is The Shore, a luxury resort of log cabins with decks stretching over the water. There’s a lot of tension between the two sides, and everything comes to a head on New Year’s Eve, when the residents of The Shore host a glamorous party for their neighbours across the lake. The story starts on January 1, when the locals are taking part in their traditional New Year’s Day swim, only to discover a body floating through the mist. This kickstarts a cross-border murder investigation led by Detective Constable Ffion Morgan and her English counterpart, Detective Constable Leo Brady.

Q. Is this the beginning of a new series, with DC Ffion Morgan at the center?

Clare: To date, all my books have been standalone thrillers. I never planned to write a series, but then Ffion walked onto my screen and into my heart, and I realized I wanted to stick with her for more than one mystery. She’s a fierce, spiky young woman—a complete nightmare to work (and live) with—but she’s also loyal and funny, and I loved writing her. I also loved the interplay between her and Leo Brady, and was desperate to see what happened next between them!

Q. You were a police officer for twelve years. What did that role offer to your writing? When did you decide you wanted to leave the force and give writing a shot?

Clare: Being a police officer might seem like a very different job to writing books, but it was the perfect training ground for a novelist. It exposed me to people from so many different types of background, and showed me how fine a line we all walk between right and wrong, safety and danger. Lives are turned upside down in a heartbeat. My job also taught me how to tell someone’s story in a compelling way, finding the right words to convince a judge of what had happened. A detective searches for the story in the forensics, or the CCTV; she listens to unreliable narrators and picks out the truth. That’s not so different to what I do now, albeit my stories are fictional.

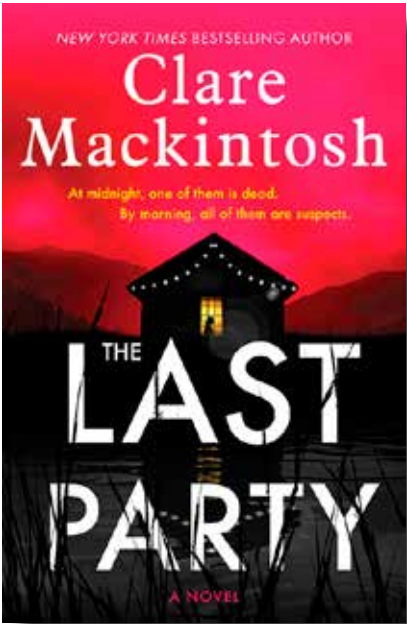
I left the police primarily because I was struggling to balance work with raising three small children. I took a two-year career break and paid the bills by copywriting and pitching features to magazines and newspapers. Just before I was due to return to work, I signed a book deal for my debut novel, *I Let You Go*. I never went back to the police.

Q. Your 2014 debut, *I Let You Go*, sold more than a million copies worldwide, and your career seems to have only gone up from there. What would you tell your younger writing self about success, dreams, and getting it right?

Clare: It’s been a rollercoaster, that’s for sure. In some ways, I wish I’d started writing much earlier, except that I know I only write the way I do now, because of the experiences I’ve had over the years. I’ve always seized every opportunity I’ve been presented with, so I have no regrets. As for advice—I’m still learning!

Q. In 2023 you’re slated to release a title, *I Promise It Won’t Always Hurt Like This*. What’s it about?

Clare: In 2006 my son died and my world fell apart. I spoke to a woman who had lost a child many years previously and she promised me the pain would ease in time, that life would be good again. I found it impossible to believe. Then, on the fourteenth anniversary of my son’s death, I realised my heart didn’t hurt anymore; that I really had healed. Part memoir, part self-help, *I Promise...* is a message to anyone grieving—my promise that it won’t always hurt the way it does now.



Clare Mackintosh’s latest: *The Last Party*

It’s the party to end all parties ... but not everyone is here to celebrate.

On New Year’s Eve, Rhys Lloyd has a house full of guests. His vacation homes on Mirror Lake are a success, and he’s generously invited the village to drink champagne with their wealthy new neighbors.

But by midnight, Rhys will be floating dead in the freezing waters of the lake.

On New Year’s Day, Ffion Morgan has a village full of suspects. The tiny community is her home, so the suspects are her neighbors, friends and family—and Ffion has her own secrets to protect.

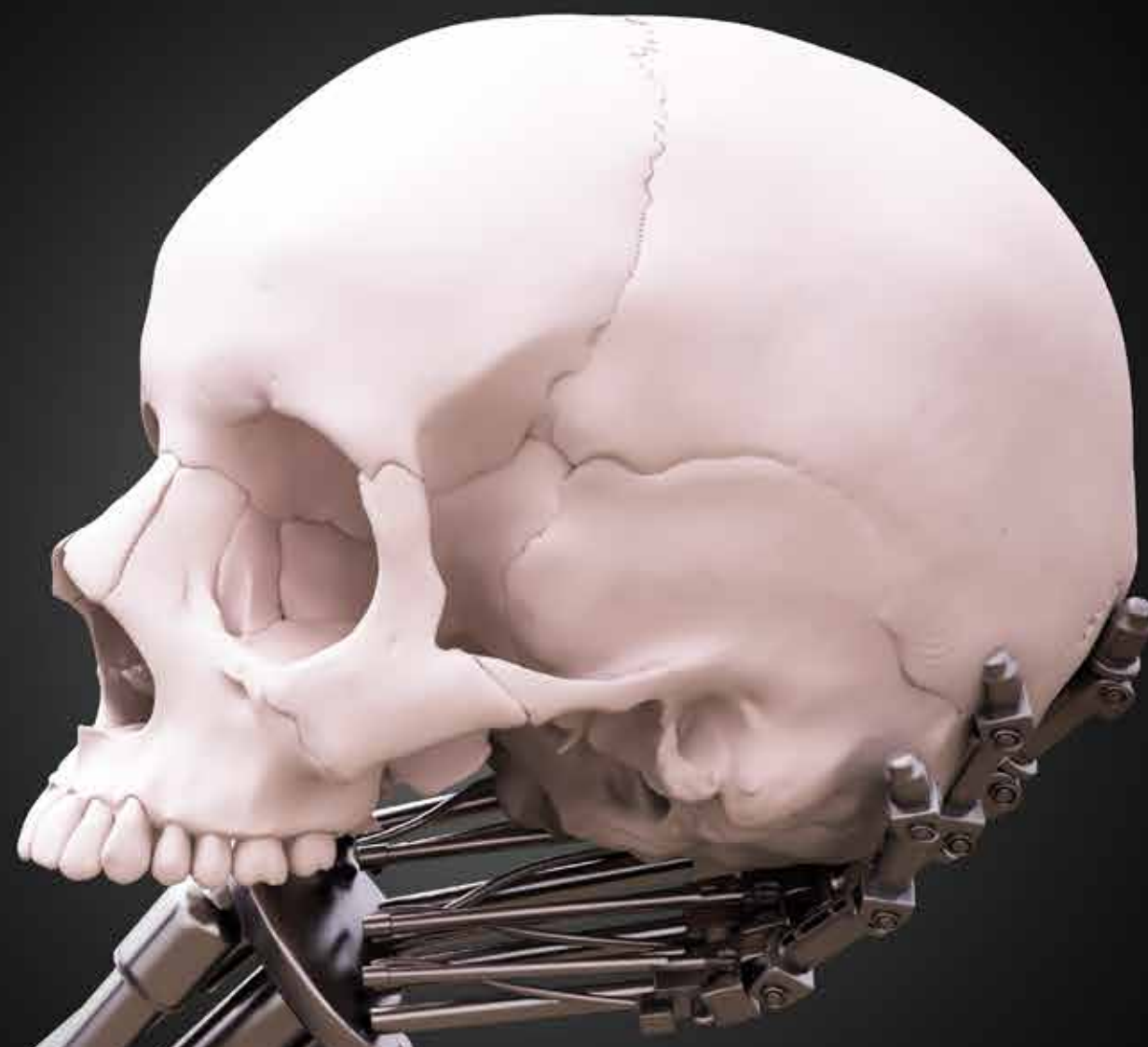
With a lie uncovered at every turn, soon the question isn’t who wanted Rhys dead ... but who finally killed him?

In a village with this many secrets, murder is just the beginning.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

BY ADAM SAINT

When science goes rogue, AI becomes the perfect villain—one that can challenge the very nature of human identity.



Who am I? A question that immediately draws you in—how can somebody not know who they are? It creates mystery and jeopardy and is an ideal basis for any thriller, or indeed for literature in other genres. Only a powerful and malevolent entity could conceal a person's own identity from them.

Historically, this role might be played in a thriller by a king or a government: take, for instance, *The Man in the Iron Mask* by Alexandre Dumas or the Bourne novels by Robert Ludlum. But more recently, governments have been replaced as shady all-powerful actors by vast international corporations and inexplicably complex beings of artificial intelligence (AIs).

An AI is an ideal villain for any thriller and one that directly challenges the nature of human identity and even the pre-eminence of humanity. Thrillers tend to reflect the pre-occupations of their times. *Invasion of the*



Body Snatchers—where identities are co-opted by aliens and the host body is replaced by a vacant automaton—is often cited as a metaphor for the spread of hostile political ideas during the Cold War (Communism or McCarthyism, depending on the political affiliation of the viewer). In *The Manchurian Candidate*, political control over a person's identity is the direct threat—in that case, mind control by a foreign state of a presidential candidate.

Nowadays, the secretly powerful deus ex machina that steals or conceals your identity is more likely to be a machine. Rogue science can steal or copy your identity. In *Dark Matter* by Blake Crouch, it is quantum mechanics that creates the confusion as to the narrator's identity. But a rogue AI is the ultimate machine enemy. *The Matrix* is perhaps the paradigm example: an all-powerful network that holds humanity enmeshed in a fake world where nobody knows their true identity. Another rogue AI features in *Daemon* by Daniel Suarez. This is a thriller that pulls at many different threads of our insecurity in the modern world. The hyper-connected networks of business and the

internet allow a devious computer program to infiltrate and control corporations and to affect the real world—it is effectively the manifestation of its creator after his untimely early death.

FROM FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTER TO ANDROIDS

Not only can an evil AI conceal or obfuscate a person's own identity, but it may also raise questions as to the identity and uniqueness of humanity itself. In a previous age, the challenge posed by scientific discovery was to the nature of the physical living body: Frankenstein as the artificial life that embodies a moral awareness lacking in its creator. AI poses a challenge to the nature of the human mind as the sole repository of advanced intelligence.

As with many challenging ideas, Philip K. Dick was there decades before the rest of us: his novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and the film adaptation *Blade Runner* feature androids—artificially intelligent human-like robots—that are almost indistinguishable from humans

and in many ways superior, perhaps even in their moral sensibilities. The central dilemma is, again, *Who am I?* The existence of the living, feeling androids causes the narrator to doubt his own humanity and to speculate whether he might in fact be an android. Perhaps the modern successor to Philip K. Dick is Adam Roberts, who spins together both artificial intelligence and quantum mechanics in *The Thing Itself*. A genre-defying mix of thriller, horror, and metaphysics, this book employs AI as a device to introduce challenges to the narrator's view of their own identity.

CONSIDER THE SOURCE

Where the story is told through a particular character, and where that character's identity is somehow mysterious or obscured, this inevitably brings into view the trope of the unreliable narrator. Unreliable narrators are a discomfiting device that can add extra thrills, and AI, as a copy or simulation of human intellect, is an easy way to insert them into the story.

Westworld—particularly the mazy and unsettling remake—is a fine exponent of this technique. Like *Blade*

Runner, it features androids almost indistinguishable from humans and endowed with special powers. Inevitably, they rise up against their human masters. Much of the suspense is generated by uncertainty as to who is real and who is artificial, problems of identity tackled by both the humans and the androids.

The real secret of the quest for identity in the thriller is that it returns the focus to the individual character and their development. In their breathless enthusiasm for machines and the artificial, technothrillers risk neglecting the characters that inhabit them. But where the technology explored by the technothriller is AI and its effect on identity, the characters are crucial. After all, any successful thriller must invest the reader in its characters, even while distracting them with the plot. Lee Child's *Jack Reacher* novels enthrall millions not only due to their pacy action and twisty plots, but because the reader accompanies Reacher on his endless journey to find out who he is and where he fits in. Artificial intelligence, in thrillers and even in wider society, threatens to ask the same questions of all of us.



About the author

Adam Saint is a legal expert who advises banks and governments on artificial intelligence. As a mathematician, his contributions to medical statistic have been published in *The Lancet* and other journals. He also compiles cryptic crosswords for the *Financial Times*. Adam is the author of *The Transfer Problem*, released this year with Deixis Press. This science-fiction thriller challenges the philosophical and societal issues around AI and mind transfer technologies. Learn more at bit.ly/TransferProblemAS.



Andrew Child & Lee Child
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Lee Child & Andrew Child

Lee Child was fired in 1995 at the age of 40 as a result of corporate restructuring. Always a voracious reader, he decided to see an opportunity where others might have seen a crisis and bought six dollars’ worth of paper and pencils and sat down to write a book, *Killing Floor*, the first in the Jack Reacher series.

Andrew Child escaped from corporate life and established himself as the author of the critically-acclaimed novels *Even*, *Die Twice*, *More Harm Than Good*, *RUN*, *False Positive*, *False Friend*, *False Witness*, *Invisible*, and *Too Close To Home*. Andrew is married to novelist Tasha Alexander and lives on a wildlife preserve in Wyoming.

Q. *No Plan B* is the twenty-seventh installment of your beloved Jack Reacher series. This one has conspiracy overtones and the usual action-adventure flair readers have come to expect from your thrillers. What current events (or zeitgeist, or anything else) inspired it?

Lee: We don’t usually look for inspiration in current events because they’re too—current. We find that ideas and observations need time to mature before it’s clear which will make good stories and what should be filtered out. It’s a little like harvesting grapes—you can make juice immediately, but turning it into wine takes time. Then, when the initial concept is mature and we’re ready to start writing, we think about what kind of tone and mood we want to create. For *No Plan B* we had a sense of a world full of questions, where nothing is as it seems, and I think that contributed to the feeling of conspiracy that you picked up on.

Q. Among other things, your Reacher series is excellent for going light on back-reference, or requiring readers to have read previous titles in the series. What are your philosophies, generally, on books in a series?

Andrew: Thank you! We both love a series of books. I think the key when it comes to backstory is finding the right balance. You need to provide enough detail for people who are new to the series to feel comfortable with the characters and the world they inhabit without making long-term readers feel like they’re covering too much old ground. I don’t think there’s a formula or a golden rule for this—we just go by instinct, shaped by the experience of decades of enjoying other writers’ series.

Q. Andrew and Lee, you write together so seamlessly. How do you do it?

Lee: Once the writing has begun the process falls into two parts: figuring out what happens next in the story, and putting that down on paper. The first is the fun part and we do it together, a little like musicians improvising until they come up with a passage or a riff they really like. We do the typing part separately and then email each section back and forth with no supporting introductions or explanations because that’s the way our readers will experience the book. It was actually an unexpected benefit of COVID because when we were working on *The Sentinel*, the first book we wrote together, it wasn’t possible to be physically close every day and we found this was a great way to make sure every word is strong enough to do its job. Sometimes there’s a couple of weeks between emails, which is good, because it means one or the other of us is really in the groove.

Q. Andrew, famously, you were one of the first readers of *Killing Floor* back before Lee had published a word. What impact did that story have on you? How does it feel to be an internationally bestselling author, working in tandem with one of the all-time greats of the thriller genre?

Andrew: When I was a kid I used to think about Jack and Bobby Charlton playing football together for England, or

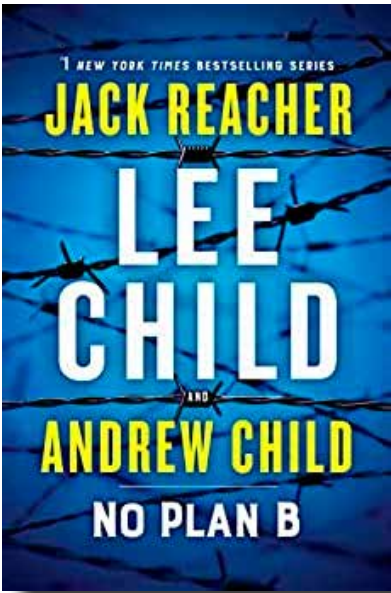
Angus and Malcolm Young playing sell-out tours with AC/DC, and daydream about getting to do something I loved with my brother. Now the dream has come true and I feel like the luckiest person in the world.

Q. Lee, what do you think of Alan Ritchson compared to Tom Cruise as Jack Reacher? How did your editorial input differ between the 2012 movie and the new TV series?

Lee: I had more involvement with the Amazon season than I did with the movies, because, don’t forget, I worked nearly twenty years in TV, so it was a world I knew. Although to be accurate, it was the great-great-grandchild of the world I knew. In particular, the narcotic, hypnotic rhythms of binge-worthy streaming were invented long after I was gone. Fortunately our head writer—Nick Santora—was an old-school storyteller who also knew the new tricks, so we were in with a chance. We needed Alan to carry the weight, and he did, big time.

Q. What’s next?

Andrew: Reacher #28. We’ll be starting on September 1, in keeping with Lee’s long-term tradition. We have no idea what it will be about. Depends on what kind of summer we have, I suppose.



Lee Child & Andrew Child’s latest: *No Plan B*

In Gerrardsville, Colorado, a woman dies under the wheels of a moving bus. The death is ruled a suicide. But Jack Reacher saw what really happened: A man in a gray hoodie and jeans, moving stealthily, pushed the victim to her demise—before swiftly grabbing the dead woman’s purse and strolling away.

When another homicide is ruled an accident, Reacher knows this is no coincidence. With a killer on the loose, Reacher has no time to waste to track down those responsible.

But Reacher is unaware that these crimes are part of something much larger and more far-reaching: an arsonist out for revenge, a foster kid on the run, a cabal of powerful people involved in a secret conspiracy with many moving parts. There is no room for error, but they make a grave one. They don’t consider Reacher a threat. “There’s too much at stake to start running from shadows.” But Reacher isn’t a shadow. He is flesh and blood. And relentless when it comes to making things right.



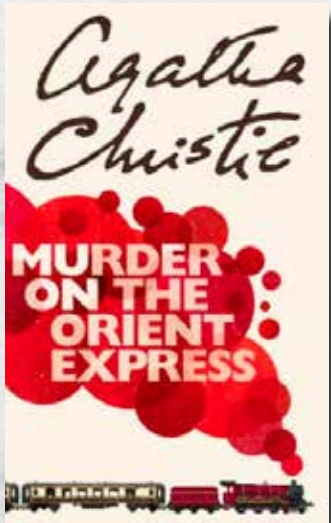
True story

Art Imitating Life

BY BIRGITTE MÄRGEN

Many readers are astounded by the ideas their favorite authors come up with, thinking them clever beyond words. It may surprise the same readers to find that these ideas are not always sprung like a lightning bolt, but merely plucked from the headlines.

After all, a writer knows a good story when they hear one, right? Here are the top fiction mysteries and thrillers inspired by real people or events that seem too evil to be true.



Murder on the Orient Express

Agatha Christie

Arguably the most famous mystery writer of all time is not immune to a good idea when she hears one. *Murder on the Orient Express* is one of her best novels and written in 1934, only two years after the Lindbergh kidnapping. When Hercule Poirot begins to connect the passengers on the Orient Express to Daisy Armstrong, a child abducted from her home and held by a gang, the case becomes eerily similar to the Lindbergh case. Is it a coincidence? As Poirot’s little gray cells would tell him: “No, I think not.”

Gone Girl

Gillian Flynn

The idea of a wife who has gone missing may ring a few bells. It did for Flynn, who admitted her idea was inspired by the Laci and Scott Peterson case a decade earlier in 2002. Scott Peterson was later tried for and convicted of the murder of his wife and their unborn son. Who could forget the pictures of the Petersons’ seemingly perfect wedding day? Flynn didn’t. In *Gone Girl*, the Dunnes’ wedding anniversary day is the perfect setting for a modern mystery.



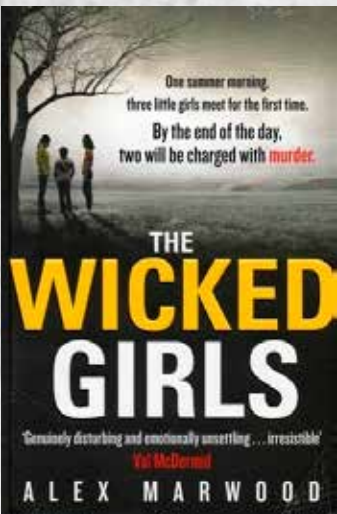
Every Secret Thing

Laura Lippman

The Wicked Girls

Alex Marwood

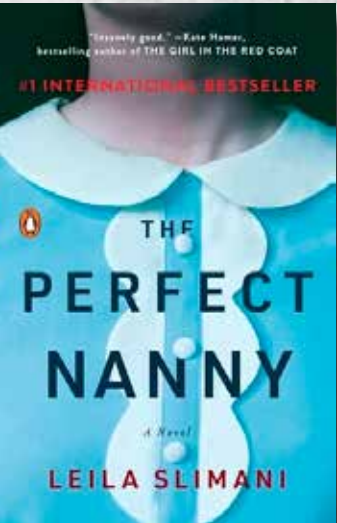
These two titles by Lippman and Marwood speak of secrets and wickedness, and that is what both deliver. The books have another commonality: The 1993 James Bulger case. The tragic true story of a two-year-old boy being abducted, tortured, and ultimately murdered by two ten-year-old boys is one of the most gruesome tales of our time. How can small children murder an innocent child? Both books explore this topic, leading to a gruesome conclusion about human nature.



The Perfect Nanny

Leila Slimani

The idea of a nanny turning into a killer would scare any working parent. When Louise is hired in *The Perfect Nanny*, things go horribly wrong. If the idea sounds familiar, you aren’t alone. Nanny Yoselyn Ortega was convicted in 2012 of killing two children she was caring for and is currently serving life in prison. As they say, good help is hard to find.



The Silence of the Lambs

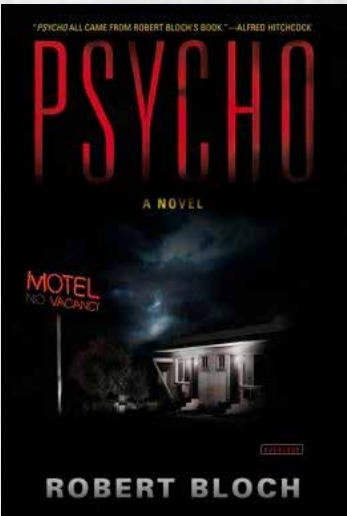
Thomas Harris

Harris made Dr. Hannibal Lecter a household name and brought us face to face with the most intriguing serial killer of our time. But Harris, working as a reporter in the 1960s, had interviewed a similar serial killer, Dr. Alfredo Ballí Treviño. Even the name “Alfredo” sounds like a sauce Hannibal would approve of. And that cast on Buffalo Bill’s arm as he lures the senator’s daughter into the van? That’s so Bundy. But the largest influence for Buffalo Bill seems to be Ed Gein. Which leads us to the next book in our lineup.

Psycho

Robert Bloch

Norman Bates owes a lot to Ed Gein, whose twisted obsession with his own verbally abusive mother led him to kill other women. Like Bates, Gein liked to keep corpses around for company, earning him the nickname the Butcher of Plainfield. And like Buffalo Bill, Gein stitched the skin of women to make a “suit” so he could put it on and become his mother. Norman Bates was not so theatrical and settled for a wig and dress.



About the author

Birgitte Märgen has an eclectic style of writing that crosses over many genres. Whether she is writing about a serial killer, a pandemic, or mental illness, she tackles topics that are relevant today. Her books include the dark serial killer thriller *The Pvritan*, the bone-chilling thriller *The Red Death*, and the gothic fairytale *Evie and the Upside-Down World of Nevermore*. She lives in the mountains with her family.

Find Birgitte on Goodreads and Amazon.





Robert Crais
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Robert Crais

Robert Crais is the author of the bestselling Cole & Pike novels. A native of Louisiana, Crais moved to Hollywood in the late 70s where he began a successful career in television, writing scripts for such major series as *Cagney & Lacey*, *Miami Vice*, and *Hill Street Blues*. In the mid-80s, following his success with the TV buddy genre, Crais created a series of crime novels based around the characters Cole & Pike. In addition, Crais has also written several bestselling standalone thrillers. He lives in LA with his wife and family.

Q. *Racing The Light*, your latest Elvis Cole and Joe Pike thriller, comes out on November 1. This time, they're off to find a missing kid. What's the story here?

Robert: Josh isn't a kid. He's a grown man, and this is part of his problem. His mother supports him financially, his father treats him like a loser, and Josh, who's a controversial podcaster with a failing podcast, has also been failing to grow up. When he disappears, Elvis figures Josh ran off with a porn star to break from his parents, but he quickly learns that Mommy and Daddy are hiding dark secrets, and a deadly team of mysterious strangers are determined to find Josh first.

It's also a story about the big changes that are coming to Elvis Cole's life. His role as a father-figure to Ben Chenier—his girlfriend Lucy's teenage son—has never been more important, not only to Ben, but to Elvis, and Elvis's relationship to Lucy will forever be changed.

Q. How does *Racing The Light*—a book filled with podcasters, conspiracies, and adult film stars—tap into the zeitgeist of our time?

Robert: These are crazy, complicated times. The pandemic has people reeling, we're completely divided politically, and the U.S. Navy dropped videos of UFOs. Paranoia is rampant. Trust is at an all-time low. People don't trust the government, the news media, elections, the CDC, or each other. The truth is out there, but what's true?

Maybe the audience for podcasts is booming because people seek a truth to make sense of their world. I get it. I'm trying to pick my way through this, too.

Q. You've said elsewhere that you discovered Raymond Chandler as a kid, and his writing got you hooked. Who's your favorite character of his? Is the world Chandler created at all similar to the world of Elvis Cole?

Robert: If you're talking Chandler you're talking Marlowe. The similarity isn't so much about place. It's an underlying belief that one person, working alone and outside the system, can make a difference. The difference might be small, and the price might be steep, but there is value in remaining true to oneself.

Q. Your early career included writing for TV shows like *Hill Street Blues* and *Miami Vice*. What did you learn from writing for the screen that translates over to Elvis and Joe?

Robert: Subtext is important. Every scene, every moment between characters, has a subtext. Also, keep it tight and keep it moving.

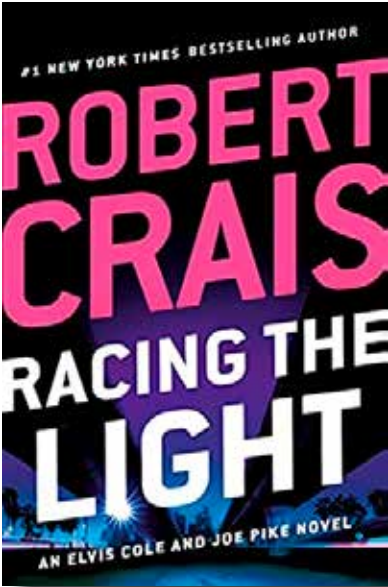
Q. A film adaptation of your novel *Hostage* came out a while back, starring Bruce Willis. If you could choose one of your newer titles to hit the screen, which would you choose, and who would star?

Robert: They'd all make fine movies, not that I think about this sort of thing, which I don't. I've been approached for film rights pretty often, and I've always said no, but I'll tell you a story. When I was on tour for *The Watchman*—the first Joe Pike novel—my agent called, gave me a phone number, and said, "I know you're going to say no, but you should talk to this guy. You want to talk to this guy. He really wants to film *The Watchman*." So me, I say, "What's the point? The answer's no." And my agent says, "It's Jonathan Demme." Full stop. So I called Mr. Demme, who was absolutely wonderful. Loved Joe Pike. Loved the book. Wanted to make the movie. We talked for something like an hour and a half. My answer was still no, but we swapped numbers and stayed in touch.

Every time I had a new book out, Jonathan would call, we'd yak for a while, and he'd ask if I'd changed my mind about *The Watchman*. Jonathan passed away in 2017. Every once in a while—not often—I think to myself, man, I would've loved to see that film.

Q. What are you working on now?

Robert: The next Elvis Cole novel!



Robert Crais's latest: *Racing The Light*

Adele Schumacher isn't a typical worried mom. When she hires Elvis to find her missing son, a controversial podcaster named Josh Shoe, she brings a bag filled with cash, bizarre tales of government conspiracies, and a squad of professional bodyguards. Finding Josh should be simple, but Elvis quickly learns he isn't alone in the hunt—a deadly team of mysterious strangers are determined to find Josh and his adult film star girlfriend first.

With dangerous secrets lurking behind every lead, Elvis needs his friend Joe Pike more than ever to uncover the truth about Josh, corrupt politicians, and the vicious business cartels rotting the heart of Los Angeles from within. And when Elvis's estranged girlfriend Lucy Chenier and her son, Ben, return, he learns just how much he has to lose ... if he survives.

Capitol Intrigue

Washington, D.C., lies at the intersection of power and crime. These are some of the true stories behind political mysteries.

BY JOHN DAVID BETHEL

Politics is about power. Politics is about control. Although it is certainly true that politics can make good government, it is also unfortunately true that politics can breed the worst in the men and women who run the show in the most powerful and richest nation in the world.

And one does not have to look far to understand how it is that writers find politics and the players in Washington such inspirational targets for fiction. The true stories that come out of our Capitol make the most enticing foundations for fiction.

Consider the following.

CHANDRA LEVY

On May 22, 2002, a man walking his dog in Rock Creek Park in upper Georgetown stumbled across skeletal remains in a forested area that were later identified as those of

Chandra Levy, an intern with the Federal Bureau of Prisons who had been missing for more than a year.

Levy was due to return to her home in California for college graduation ceremonies; when she failed to do so, her parents contacted authorities. Police searched Levy's apartment and found money, credit cards, her packed luggage, and no signs of a struggle.

During the course of their investigation, the police also discovered that Levy had a "relationship" with California Congressman Gary Condit. Initially, Condit said Levy was a "good friend," but police found Condit's DNA on clothes in Levy's apartment, and in July of 2001, he admitted to investigators that he had an affair with Levy.

After a preliminary autopsy, District of Columbia police announced there was sufficient evidence to open a homicide investigation.

Ingmar Guandique, an undocumented immigrant from El Salvador, came to the attention of police in 2001 and was



considered a person of interest in Levy’s murder. In 2009, he was charged and convicted of murdering her, but the verdict was later overturned due to prosecutorial misconduct.

Officially, Levy’s murder remains unsolved. The Levy murder could be mined for an almost endless number of plots: the obvious theory being that she was murdered to keep her quiet about the affair. But more intriguing ... perhaps she discovered underhanded dealings in contracting by the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The largest private prison companies net billions by contracting with federal, state, and local governments. People have been killed for less. A sub-plot looking into the misconduct of prosecutors, who used the false confession of a cellmate of Guandique, also offers an enticing avenue for exploration.

CONGRESSMAN BARNEY FRANK

Rep. Barney Frank, a Congressman from Massachusetts, met Steve Gobie through an “escort-model” advertisement in the *Blade* publication that served Washington’s gay community. Initially, their contact was purely transactional, with Frank paying Gobie for sex. Over time a relationship matured and Frank attempted to help Gobie, a felon who had been convicted of cocaine distribution and various sex crimes, turn his life around.

Frank hired Gobie as a “personal assistant” to do housework and be his chauffeur. He also allowed Gobie to live in his apartment when he was out of town. Gobie showed his gratitude by using the apartment as home base from which he ran a male prostitute, or “call boy,” ring.

An article in the *Washington Times* disclosed the operation and revealed that key figures in the Reagan administration, as well as prominent Washington lobbyists, patronized the call boy operation.

This tawdry tale could be the jumping-off point for plotlines rife with blackmail and extortion. Congressman Frank was chairman of the House Banking Committee, which oversees the Federal Reserve, the Treasury Department, the Securities and Exchange Commission, and most other federal financial regulators. The opportunities for creating a world of mischief are especially tantalizing given the pathway into the nation’s financial industry and the possibilities of obtaining insider information on market activities. Washington is also home to a large and very influential diplomatic community. Drawing these men and women into the tale could provide plotlines brimming with espionage and international intrigue.

TOM BARNES

Tom Barnes, a 25-year-old Senate staffer, was low on coffee, so he left his rowhouse about six blocks east of the U.S. Capitol and headed for a local market.

On his way, he was approached by a group of teenagers. One of them threatened to “bust a cap” in Barnes if he didn’t hand over some money. Barnes dismissed the threat and started walking away when he was shot behind the left ear. After four days in a coma, he died.

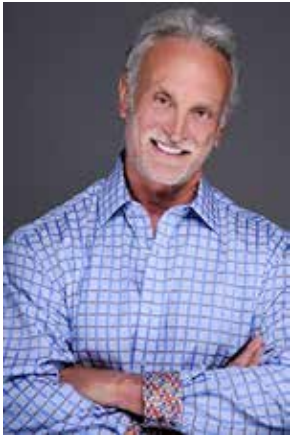
“It sent shockwaves through my office,” said Barnes’s employer, Senator Richard Shelby of Alabama. “He had a wonderful life ahead of him, a lot of promise. What a senseless killing.”

Shelby’s subsequent championing of the death penalty referendum angered many D.C. residents who were resentful of outsiders controlling the District’s affairs. The referendum failed, but violent crimes unfolding in Washington at the time shaped the creation of one of the toughest crime and sentencing measures ever passed by Congress. The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 expanded

the death penalty and created a controversial “three strikes” policy, in which violent offenders with two previous convictions would get mandatory life sentences.

This truly tragic tale could be the starting point for a political novel about a society that was—and remains—fraught with racial tension. It also has the potential to delve deeply into the many, and still lingering, resentments of a largely African-American community in Washington that is governed by an overwhelmingly white Congress. Although the citizens of the District have a right to elect a mayor and city council, Congress retains the right to review and reject laws passed by the council. The Barnes murder shined a light on various aspects of this arrangement and a creative writer could mine the tragedy for a serious look at the tensions wrought by social and racial politics.

“Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Cautionary words from Lord Acton, the 19th century politician, warning that too often a person’s morality recedes as their power increases. And that is the appeal for writers who focus their storytelling on politics.



About the author

John David Bethel is the author of award-winning novels, *Unheard Of* and *Holding Back the Dark*. Other published novels include *Little Wars* and *Wretched*. He has also been published in popular consumer magazines and respected political journals.

Bethel spent thirty-five years in senior positions in politics and government, worked as a press secretary and speechwriter to members of Congress, and is a senior consultant for communications management firms that include Burson Marsteller and The Wade Group. He graduated with Phi Beta Kappa honors from Tulane University and lives in DeLand, Florida.



Jennifer Finney Boylan & Jodi Picoult
Bestselling authors and writing team
@jodipicoult
@JennyBoylan

Jodi Picoult & Jennifer Finney Boylan

Jodi Picoult is this year’s recipient of the legendary Hale Award, which has been presented annually since 1956 by the trustees of the Richards Free Library (Newport, New Hampshire) in recognition of a distinguished body of work in the field of literature and letters. Named for poet Sarah Josepha Hale, the award honors the contributions of one of America’s most powerful women of the nineteenth century.

Professor Jennifer Finney Boylan, author of eighteen books, is the inaugural Anna Quindlen Writer in Residence at Barnard College of Columbia University. She serves on the Board of Trustees of PEN America, the nonprofit advocating for authors, readers, and freedom of expression. From 2011 to 2018, she served on the Board of Directors of GLAAD; she was co-chair of GLAAD’s Board from 2013 to 2017.

Q. Jodi, you and Jennifer make an excellent writing team. How did the relationship start? What were some unexpected joys or obstacles in writing with a partner?

JP: In what is possibly the only good thing to ever come out of Twitter, Jenny one day tweeted that she dreamed we were co-writing a novel. Now, I’d read Jenny’s work for years and admired her as an author and a human being, so of course I responded asking what the book was about. Jenny and I have not had the same lived experience, which is why I thought that teaming up on a book about what it means to be a woman was so fascinating. Plus, who doesn’t want to work with someone as talented as she is?

We DM’d some ideas for the story, but due to our busy schedules, we didn’t expect to begin our collaboration until September of 2020. But in March 2020, Jenny dropped me an email: “My schedule has just emptied ... how about you?” The pandemic was a complete upheaval for me—because of my asthma I was locked down for fifteen months. It is not exaggerating to say that working on this book with Jenny during the beginning of the pandemic gave me the focus I needed at the time to keep from completely spiraling out of control in a panic. I will add that unlike when I collaborated with my daughter, Sammy, on YA novels—collaborating with Jenny was both easier and more difficult. Since we are both established writers, I realized pretty early on that someone needed to be the Keeper of the Manuscript (me, because I’m a control freak) and that we would have to review each other’s sections in order to make the text feel seamless, rather than like two pigs fighting under a blanket.

Q. Jennifer, how would you describe your experience writing with Jodi? How did you develop the story together?

JFB: Jodi will, perhaps, tell the story of how I had a dream one morning that I was writing a novel with her, tweeted this out, and quickly got a response from her, “Let’s do it!” And in so

many ways, working with her was just that: a dream. We talked about the book for a long time before we set to work; originally we had planned to begin in the fall of 2020. But then, trapped inside during quarantine, we suddenly had time on our hands. We worked out the two stories for the two main characters, and then I crawled around on the floor of my office with the print-outs and a big pair of scissors and some tape. Once we had the story, it was a matter of each of us writing our chapters—which we then immediately shared with the other. We edited each other—plus we agreed that each of us would write one of the other author’s character’s chapters, just to keep everyone guessing who wrote what. Although to be honest, by the time we were all done, I would often look at a paragraph and be unable to remember which one of us had come up with it.

Q. Jodi, you’re famous for—among other things—tackling the big issues in your storytelling. How did you and Jennifer approach the ripped-from-the-headlines elements of *Mad Honey*?

JP: It’s funny—I don’t think of this as ripped from the headlines. I think of it as a story that needs telling and a conversation that needs to be happening. It wasn’t until the book was already in the process of publication that a whole rash of laws started being passed stripping rights away from certain individuals in a way that feels painfully timely to address. I actually think of this book a lot like I think about *Small Great Things*—as a book that makes you look at the biases you might have without realizing you have them—and that gives you the basic education to begin to do better.

Q. Jennifer, what do you hope readers take away from reading *Mad Honey*? What conversations do you hope the novel sparks or continues?

JFB: Well, in some ways this book asks the questions that have been at the center of all my work: What makes us our-

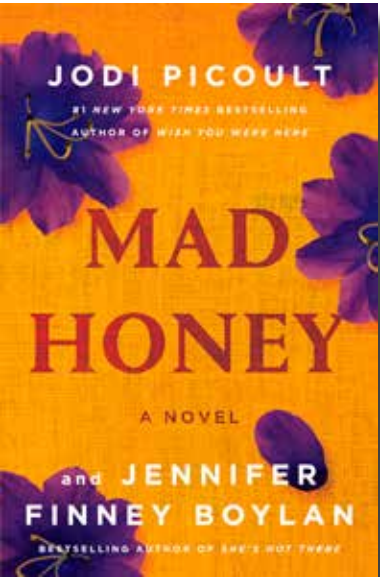
selves? What parts of our history do we share with the people we love, and what do we keep to ourselves? What is the difference between what is secret, and what is private? And if you love someone, do you love the person that they are, as well as the person they might yet become? It’s the question we all ask ourselves as we grow older, and change with time. If you live long enough, the person you married in your youth may bear no resemblance to the person you find yourself with later in life. And yet, we are always our same selves. Who else would we be?

Q. What’s next for both of you?

JFB: My next work is a book of nonfiction in which I hope to address some of these same questions in a different way. How do we become ourselves? And what role, specifically, does education and schooling play in that process? The working title is *Good Morning Poison Squirrels*, which is the thing a friend of mine mistakenly thought her teacher said to the Kindergarten class each morning. If that phrase looks funny, say it out loud. You might be surprised how familiar it is.

And of course, I would work on any future book with Jodi in a heartbeat. In some ways I felt like I became more myself as an author when I was co-writing with her than I am when I’m only writing by myself. Writing *Mad Honey* together has been like the perfect marriage. Except that we never had to listen to each other snore.

JP: In 2022 I’m mired in the world of musical theatre as a librettist. In June, I launched a musical based on my YA book *Between The Lines* in NYC, and this fall I’m launching a musical adaptation of *The Book Thief* in the UK before I head out on tour for *Mad Honey*. In between I’m busy doing research on my 2024 novel, which is about gender discrimination in publishing ... and which will convince you that Shakespeare didn’t write his plays!



Jodi Picoult & Jennifer Finney Boylan’s latest: *Mad Honey*

Olivia McAfee knows what it feels like to start over. Her picture-perfect life—living in Boston, married to a brilliant cardiothoracic surgeon, raising a beautiful son, Asher—was upended when her husband revealed a darker side. She never imagined she would end up back in her sleepy New Hampshire hometown, living in the house she grew up in, and taking over her father’s beekeeping business.

Lily Campanello is familiar with do-overs, too. When she and her mom relocate to Adams, New Hampshire, for her final year of high school, they both hope it will be a fresh start.

And for just a short while, these new beginnings are exactly what Olivia and Lily need. Their paths cross when Asher falls for the new girl in school, and Lily can’t help but fall for him, too. With Ash, she feels happy for the first time. Yet at times, she wonders if she can she trust him completely ...

Then one day, Olivia receives a phone call: Lily is dead, and Asher is being questioned by the police. Olivia is adamant that her son is innocent. But she would be lying if she didn’t acknowledge the flashes of his father’s temper in him, and as the case against him unfolds, she realizes he’s hidden more than he’s shared with her.



A Permanent Solution

BY J. M. TAYLOR

A switch failed and the commuter rail cars jackknifed off the tracks, crumbling like an accordion. Still pushing at top speed, the locomotive leapt off the switch and crashed on its side. The derailment took out a row of high voltage towers, as well as a section of concrete wall.

Bill Reynolds swore. It would take over an hour to repair, and he needed to get to the office.

He cut the power, swore again, then leaned over the model to remove the cars and locomotive. But the shelf was too wide for him to easily reach the wreckage. He stumbled, pushing an apartment building off its foundation. Of course, it was lighted, and the move disconnected the wires. Now the problem was below the surface as well.

With one more barrage of invective, he squatted under the model, following with his finger the neat maze of colored wires until he found the connection to the turnout controller. The displaced building had dragged a bundle of wires off a bracket. He tried to unravel them, picking at the bundle carefully, but somehow it all got knotted, and just as the model cables had come down in the accident above, he had a real power outage below. His rage was sudden and fierce, and before he knew what he was doing, he'd swept his hands across the underside of the layout, breaking wires, pulling out supports. Then he was topside again, punching his fist through a hill, which in turn took out a bridge and a small cemetery. He hit it again and again, until his knuckles bled into the plaster dust.

He slumped to the floor, too lost to even cry. Not for the first time, he wondered if he should see a therapist, but that meant letting go of the pain, and right now, that's all he had.

When he had finally calmed enough to check his watch, he saw it was long after nine. By now, any real estate slips at either of the law offices where he contracted would have been pulled by other title searchers. He'd lost a day: no reports, no income.

On the other hand, now he had an excuse to make improvements, to get closer to the truth. He'd read an article about using contour maps to make more accurate models of hills. And since the electrical work needed to be redone, he might as well add that bank of outlets to the wall, and eliminate the extension cords he'd been relying on. He did a search on his phone, and dialed one electrician after another. One by one they turned him down, with the same excuse of being too busy. Finally he reached a guy who agreed to the job.

"I can handle that, easy." The voice was both gruff and friendly.

"Thank God," Bill said. "Everyone else said the job was too small."

"I gotta take anything that comes my way," the electrician said. "Business ain't good for small timers like me. Guy I knew in the same boat killed himself." He snorted. "Business ain't worth that. Permanent solution to a temporary problem. Anyhow, you don't care about that. Tomorrow after lunch all right?"

Bill said, "Sure." That would mean at best only a half day of work tomorrow, but it would have to do.

The next day, a van ground to a stop in front of the house, and Bill fought a wave of dizziness. He'd been the only one to cross the threshold in more than two years. He reminded himself it was the only way to move forward. Just

one old guy who'd be busy with his own work. Bill could easily hide in the other room. He gritted his teeth when he heard the hollow slide and clunk of the van door, and the clatter of gathering equipment. A few minutes later, the doorbell rang, and with one last check on his rising panic, Bill opened the door.

But the face that confronted him came from another world, and threw his mind off like the bad track switch. It was too young, too hard, to be the owner of the affable voice Bill heard on the phone. Too familiar to be a mistake.

A lifetime ago, Bill's son spent half the day or more at the playground across the street. Usually it was his wife who took him, but Bill had logged plenty of hours on the slatted metal benches himself. For the most part, they shared it with a few of the neighborhood toddlers. But afternoons, when school let out, a scrum of teens rumbled along to smoke weed and tag the slide with graffiti. Bill noted that some of them still had the soft features of childhood, but they learned to hide it with sneers and sudden movements designed to keep people like him on edge. Designed to make a new father worry for his son.

Now one of those punks stood on his porch, a tool belt hanging from his waist like a gunslinger's holster, waiting to be let in. He had grown up, and lost all of the softness that had been there almost three years ago, but he was unmistakably the same kid.

"Hey, mister, you gonna let me in?" he said. He hefted a five-gallon bucket stuffed with tools. A jumble of cord spilled out of the top like a rat's nest.

Bill stammered. Could it be happening all over again, this time to Bill himself? He wondered if he'd be fast enough to nab a screwdriver from the bucket to defend himself. He ran through his frantic options until he heard another voice call from behind the van's open rear door.

"Hey, knucklehead, don't talk to customers like that. Who do you think you are?"

The speaker came into view, a man whose beard spilled out of his face like the cord in the kid's bucket. A dingy t-shirt barely contained his beefy arms and belly. Holding a large plastic toolbox and a drop cloth, he walked up the porch steps, careful to avoid the broken one, and pushed

the younger man aside with his free hand. "Ed Leary," he said.

Warily, Bill shook his hand, but then he said, "I thought you were coming by yourself."

"It'll be better this way. Ronald here needs to learn, and it'll go faster and cheaper than if I did it myself. Can we come in?" He left the toolbox on the porch.

After a beat, Bill stepped aside. He told them, "First room on the left," and watched as they made their way down the hall to his workroom. "Watch the goddamn walls," Leary told the kid. "Then go get the other toolbox."

"Why didn't you bring it in?"

"Because I want you to carry it, numbskull. You wanna earn, you gotta learn. Get the box and watch the goddamn walls."

"You already said that," Ronald grumbled. Bill held his breath and shrunk against the wall. Maybe he didn't need those outlets after all.

"You can wait in the van if you're gonna have that attitude, and forget about getting paid."

"Whatever." But Ronald got the box, and Bill saw that he was careful with the goddamn walls.

"Sorry, Mr. Reynolds," Leary said. "I don't like to swear in front of the people I work for, but I gotta break him down before he's going to learn anything."

They walked into the room. Bill expected Leary to say something about a grown man playing with trains, but he merely bent to look under the layout, as if he saw room-sized reproductions of the neighborhood all the time. He tapped the walls with his fist. "Good," he said. "Plaster and lath. Things should go fairly easy."

The kid came in and put the toolbox down. He looked at Bill's layout and said, "Damn, I used to live in that triple-decker there. There's my bedroom window. But that old convenience store is a pizza place now." He reached over to point it out, lingering uncertainly near a telephone pole.

"Don't touch," Bill snapped. "I don't need you breaking anything else." Ronald pulled his hand back as if he'd gotten a shock.

Bill remembered the day his son had pointed at that very pole, shouting, "Tree!" It was one of the first times he'd tried to identify something on his own. That was just before ... But Bill shook it off. Now wasn't the time.

Just in time, Leary cut in. He told the kid, "Your job is to watch and learn." Turning back to Bill, he said, "This is Ronald. He promises to keep his mouth shut, doesn't he?"

"I told you, call me Sly." But the kid looked away when he said it.

"I'll call you whatever I want. Put down the drop cloth. Get it right to the corners."

Ronald stood his ground, unsure whether to listen to his boss or acknowledge Bill's anger. But then he climbed under the platform and opened up the cloth. Leary inspected the layout. "The detail's amazing. I almost expect to find my truck in front of your house. You got every ride in the playground. That hole over there the graveyard?"

"Yeah," said Bill. He felt the need to explain. "I used to have a tabletop layout that covered about four square blocks. Now it's more like a square mile."

Leary whistled. "More detail means more headaches. All right, that's enough down there, Ronald. Let's get to work." Then he said to Bill, "If I remember, you wanted a new row of receptacles, right?"

"Right," Bill said. Somehow Leary knew how to divert his attention as smoothly as a brakeman at a wye switch. "In the old days, I had just a couple of transformers to run everything. Now I've got a digital command control, which takes up a lot more power. And I've got my eye on putting in wifi control, but that means setting up a computer, plus you see I got most buildings wired for light and sound, not to mention the streetlights and everything else." He stopped. He'd forgotten how to talk to other people, when to put on the brakes.

"It's a lot of wiring," Leary said, unconcerned. "You probably got enough practice to do the job yourself, save some dough."

Bill shook his head. "I'm OK attaching wires to a terminal, but I wouldn't go to the source. I got a healthy fear of electricity."

Ronald climbed out from under the platform. "Damn," he muttered. "It's like jungle vines hanging down there."

Leary snorted. "Who do you think you are, Tarzan? Did you get the cloth right up against the wall?" He peeked under to be sure. "No, you didn't." He pulled it out, bundled it up, and handed the balled up cloth back to Ronald. "Have it go up the wall a couple inches the way I taught you."

Ronald groaned. "I banged my head last time."

"Maybe it'll knock some sense into you. Fix it." He turned to Bill. "I gotta check your service panel, see what kind of capacity you got." He pointed to a door in the kitchen. "That the basement?"

"Yeah."

"Ronald, stay quiet and unpack the tools the way I showed you. I'll be right back." He disappeared through the cellar door, leaving Bill and Ronald eyeing each other.

After a tense moment, Ronald broke the spell and climbed under the layout. Only then did Bill find the voice to say, "I know who you are."

From under the shelf, Ronald said, "You don't know a thing. I'll take whatever old Leary has to dish out, but you're a different story. My advice—stay out of my way, and maybe you'll get back to playing with your toys without no more trouble. I had nothin' to do with that noise, feel me?"

It had been a home invasion. Some gangster wannabes on a spate of daytime break-ins. The house should've been empty at the time, but a slight fever scuttled that plan. Stumbling on the mother and child hiding in the bedroom, one kid panicked and shot them both. Neighbors saw three hoods jump in a car and peel out. The police caught up with two of them a few hours later, smoking blunts in a low-rider, their trunk still full of stereo equipment and a TV. Neither one was willing to make a deal and name the third. They never did find him.

When it was over, when the mumbling friends and relatives made their embarrassed escapes, Bill filled the spaces with the endless loop of electric trains. It had started one night in his son's room with a basic HO set he'd bought for some future Christmas that now would never come. Soon enough it progressed to a serious attempt to build a realistic layout. The clicketyclack of wheel on rail held back the buzzing in his head—the wordless static that felt like steel wool against his brain.

"I had nothin' to do with it," Ronald said. "Man, I was long gone."

"Yeah? Where?"

Finished with the drop cloth, Ronald bent to the tools, and took them out one by one: a voltage meter, tape mea-

sure. “College,” he said. Screwdriver set, reciprocating saw. “Takin’ classes.” He clapped the saw’s battery pack into the handle like it was a magazine clip.

The minute clicked past, until Leary reappeared. “Plenty of space for new circuits. We’ll be done in a couple of hours.” He surveyed the tools Ronald had laid out, like scalpels in an operating room. “Hey, you got something right. You might work out after all.” He leaned under the table, and tapped a spot on the wall. “This good?” he asked.

“That’s fine,” Bill forced himself to say.

“OK, Ronald, get under here with me. Where do we start?”

Ronald pocketed a stud finder and dragged the reciprocating saw with him. A few beeps and several seconds later, Bill heard Ronald say, hesitantly, “Here?”

“Are you sure?” Like a teacher helping a student sound out spelling words.

“Here, then.”

“Which is it? ’Cuz if I put a hole in this guy’s wall, and it’s the wrong place, I gotta pay for it, which means you gotta pay for it. Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Here.”

“That’s right.”

Ronald whined, “That’s what I said the first time. Why’d you make me go through all that?”

“I need to know that if I do make a mistake, you’re going to be paying enough attention and have the balls to tell me I’m wrong.” He turned to Bill. “That plaster’s gonna get dusty.” Bill wished he’d thought to put a sheet over the layout. Leary told Ronald, “OK, start the hole.”

The saw pounded and protested. Bill smelled plaster and electricity, and when he looked below, he saw a cut in the wall, twice the size he’d expected. He choked back a scream. A fist gripped his chest as he watched the attack on the wall, but he forced himself to stay in the room.

He told himself it was plaster and lath, not flesh and bone. And he needed this, needed it so he could find out the reasons for what happened. It was there in that model, somewhere.

A minute later, there was silence.

“Good job,” Leary said. “Now get the fish tape and the roll of number 12 romex off the truck.”

When the kid left, Leary stood up and stretched. “I gotta stay on him all the time. Sometimes I think he’s dumb as a rock, but he’s starting to learn.”

Leary’s gruff voice cut through the fog, and Bill found himself saying, “He can’t be that dumb. He went to college.”

Leary barked a laugh. “He said that? Son of a gun!” Ronald came back carrying a coil of wire and a box with a few inches of cable sticking out like a snake from a charmer’s basket.

“College, huh? Tell the man what that really means.” Ronald blushed. “Go ahead,” Leary told him. “He should know.”

Bill watched the kid squirm, trying to contain his humiliation. After a couple of gulps and shoulder rolls, he said, “I did time. Vehicular homicide.” Bill imagined he himself would’ve punched Leary for exposing him like this, but the kid, again, took it. “Can we just get to work?”

“ ’Atta boy,” Leary said, and Bill thought he heard real affection in his tone. “It’s part of his parole agreement. You gave the right answer, Ronald: ‘Let’s get to work.’ All right, you fish that tape through the wall, and I’ll attach it to the cable downstairs.” He picked up the box and headed for the basement, leaving Bill and Ronald alone again.

“So you are a killer,” Bill whispered. “You’re just as bad as the rest of them.”

The wire hit a snag, and Ronald jiggled it free. “Wasn’t murder,” he said. “I was high and hit a telephone pole. Right about here.” He rapped his knuckles under a street corner a few blocks from where they stood, directly beneath the pole he’d always remember as a tree. Today the real one was cracked, propped up with a second pole. Now Bill knew why. “My twelve-year-old cousin hit the windshield.”

“Must be hard to face your family.”

Ronald’s shrug was half-hearted. “I’m mostly on my own now. It’s lucky Ed lets me ride with him.”

An idea was forming in Bill’s head, a series of stops along a winding track. “Why not just leave? Pack it all in and take off. No one would miss you.”

Ronald stood up straight. “I did my time. You got anything to say, I’m standing right here.”

Bill kept still, but didn’t say anything.

Ronald sneered and nodded. “Thought so. You’re not the type that speaks his mind. Your wife, though. She didn’t take any crap.” When Bill didn’t answer, he kept going. “She had a word or two for me and my boys whenever she walked past us.”

“Don’t think you can talk about her. Not one word.”



Ronald barreled right past that flag. “One time, she got all in my face. Used words I didn’t think she knew. My boys were laughin’ but I thought she was gonna grab me by the ear like my moms.”

“Her name was Sharon,” Bill said. “My boy was Will. This was his room.”

Ronald nodded, then bent back to the fishing tape. He finished pulling up the romex.

“Got it!” he called down the hole. Then he turned and asked, as if the last moment hadn’t happened, “That why it’s all out of date?”

“Yeah.” Blaring horns in his head dopplered into silence.

Ronald scrambled out from under the platform and surveyed it. “It looks good,” he said. He pointed to the park where he used to hang out. “You should put them in it. He liked the slide.”

Leary came back, covered in dust and whatever else fell through the walls. “We’re doing good,” he said. “Now we install the boxes for the receptacles.”

Bill left them to their work. He sat in the living room, staring at the blank wall. A cascade of memories rushed through him like box cars. He screwed his fists into his eyes until the roar passed and he heard Leary reviewing the order of connecting the wires. He said something about “switching the neutral.” It sounded more like philosophy than electricity.

Finally Leary came into the living room, Ronald behind him. “OK,” he said. “The boxes are in and secure. It’s late, though. Mind if Ronald comes back tomorrow to do the finish work?”

Bill stood up, pushed an image from his mind. “Actually, that would do perfectly. I’ve got a few things I need to take

HERE'S WHAT WE'RE READING THIS FALL

care of tonight.”

“Great,” Leary said. “Just another minute, and I’ll turn on the juice.” He headed into the basement. At his shout, Ronald plugged in the saw and tested it. It sounded like squealing brakes.

A few minutes later, he was alone. A night of repairs stretched out ahead of him.

The next morning, Ronald knocked on the door. Bill let him in and they went together into the train room. The kid unpacked a tattered canvas bag: a tub of patching plaster, roll of plastic mesh, two putty knives—one wide plastic, the other narrow metal. He laid them out neatly, even though Leary wasn’t there to inspect his work.

Ronald said, “Let me show you how to do it, in case you ever to fix a hole yourself.”

Smug, Bill thought. He wondered if that was a shot about the ruined scenery.

“First,” Ronald said with authority, “You need some of this.” He held up a spool of mesh tape, cut off a length and rolled it up. “Shove it in the big spaces for backing.”

When he finished the packing, he opened the tub of compound and used the wider plastic knife to lift out a glob. He spread the putty from the good plaster toward the new sockets. “Like you did with the hills up there,” he told Bill. “When it dries, use some fine sandpaper. After it’s painted, you’d never know there was a hole there.”

Bill admired his technique. But he knew that no matter how good the patch looked, it would never be as strong as the rest of the wall. It really was too bad, the waste of it all.

Ronald used the smaller knife to fill in some divots. There was only a narrow opening between the wet plaster and the newly-installed boxes. Ronald hummed with contentment. Bill would always remember that. Like a happy little kid.

The putty knife grazed the metal box. That’s all it took. The circuit complete, electricity surged from the wire Bill had loosened the night before. Ronald’s eyes flew open, a look of surprise burned into his face. Bill wondered if there was recognition too. Just in case, he said, “That pole was hit six months after the break-in. You weren’t in college when they were killed, Sly. You were the third one who got away. But you’re learning a lesson just the same.”

As his body twitched, Ronald sighed and collapsed. The connection broke, but the smell of singed flesh told Bill there was nothing more to do, except to call in the report. A tragic accident, poor workmanship.

But that was a temporary problem, and he had a permanent solution.

J. M. Taylor has appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*, *Thuglit*, *Crime Syndicate*, *Tough Crime*, *Shotgun Honey*, and *Wildside Black Cat*, among others. His first novel, *Night of the Furies*, was published by New Pulp Press and listed on Spinetingler's Best of 2013. Genretarium Press released his second novel, *Dark Heat*, in 2021.



Upgrade
Blake Crouch

Crouch’s latest sci-fi techno thriller is a thought-provoking roller-coaster ride laced with plenty of ass-kicking action. There is abundant suspense with intrigue and twists to satisfy any crime thriller enthusiast.

Although flawed, Logan Ramsey is immensely likable. He lives in a future where DNA editing has become illegal due to the dangers of unintended consequences. The government has created the Gene Protection Agency (GPA) to police and shut down any rogue scientists that persist in the prohibited research.

Logan is the lead agent on a raid of a potential illegal lab. Entering the basement, he realizes something is wrong. In a sudden explosion, a shower of ice flechettes punctures his hazmat suit, resulting in multiple lacerations.

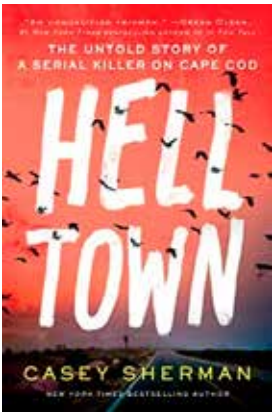
It is assumed that he has been exposed to a synthetic virus carrying genetic material into his cells, with the capa-

bility of rewriting his DNA to an unknown effect. Initially, no untoward symptoms are noted. However, Logan soon starts to experience a metamorphosis. His mind and perception are enhancing daily, and then hourly. His strength and memory have improved exponentially. He has been “upgraded” ... and apparently lured to the explosion on purpose.

In fear that the GPA will confine him at least, if not execute him, he flees to find answers. He discovers that his only living relative, his older sister Kara, has also been targeted with an upgrade. It is one step in a much larger plan to infect the same changes on all of humanity.

Crouch proves to be a masterful storyteller as he weaves an intriguing and entertaining tale. As the reader is led down many a twisted road, the suspense escalates to an exciting denouement, laced with non-stop action as the pages fly by. This is a cautionary tale on the possible next step in human evolution. Is making people smarter a long range answer, or would an infusion of empathy and compassion better serve humanity?

Reviewed by Lou Jacobs



Helltown
Casey Sherman

Part true crime and part fiction, this story of a serial killer in Provincetown, Massachusetts, in the late 1960s is amazing. From the rivalry between writers Kurt Vonnegut and Norman Mailer, who lived on the same street, to a bit of Chappaquidik, to a piece of the Manson murders, this book has it all.

Tony Costa was a serial killer who achieved notoriety for the brutal murders of several woman, who he cut into pieces and buried in the woods in Truro. The murders were committed around the same time as the Manson murders in Los Angeles, and like Manson, Costa had his own following, though smaller.

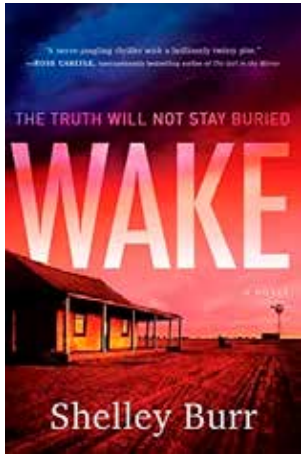
District Attorney Edmund Dinis, running for re-election in Provincetown, gained notoriety for his garish description of the murders: “The hearts of each girl had been removed from the bodies and were not in the graves ... Each body was cut into as many parts as there are joints.” He went on to say

that there were teeth marks on the bodies as well, coining the phrase “vampire killer.” Dinis was also infamous for his involvement in the Chappaquiddick incident and cover-up involving Ted Kennedy.

Rival writers Mailer and Vonnegut lived down the street from each other in Provincetown. Both wrote about the case, Mailer penning *Tough Guys Don’t Dance* and Vonnegut anthologizing in *Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloon*s. Vonnegut was infinitely more successful, even writing an article for *Life* magazine. Sherman does an excellent job giving interesting biographies of both prolific authors.

Sherman took conversational liberties in Helltown, specifically the dialogue between Costa and his alter ego, Cory Deveraux, also the name of his rival in the drug trade. The author, in his final notes, had also gained access to Costa’s unpublished manuscript, which gave him credible research. While Helltown is an amazing recount of this true crime, it is so much more. Sherman was able to flawlessly weave stories that happened around the same time. One of the best books to read this year.

Reviewed by Cara DiCostanzo



Wake
Shelley Burr

Wake takes place in the dying and hardscrabble rural area of the fictional town of Nannine, Australia. Nineteen years ago, young Evylyn McCreery disappeared from her family’s lucrative, expansive farm. Over the years, all sorts of rumors, conspiracies, and innuendos have haunted not only the region, but the family as well. Still, the locals have stood by the McCreery family and is even protective when interlopers trickle in, nosing around the case.

The notoriety of the missing girl has also led to the establishment of a large reward for the discovery of what happened, doubled by the McCreery family with their only stipulation being either she or her body is located.

Lane Holland, once with hopes to become a police officer, now is a mostly self-taught private investigator with an

interest in solving cold cases. Holland has decided to come to Nannine to solve the case of Evylyn McCreery.

Mina is Evylyn’s younger twin and still remains on the family farm, along with her widowed father. Mina has a taciturn and defensive personality, and when approached by Lane, she is immediately skeptical of his motives and quite uncooperative with his overtures.

Even though locals are resistant to fully answer his questions, Lane refuses to be dissuaded and continues his investigation. This causes ripples of discomfort that spread throughout the small community in more ways than one.

Wake is quite the impressive debut novel. Burr captures the atmosphere and landscape of the tough rural life of Australia, and in such a way that her words easily create mental imagery that enhances the reader’s experience. Another thing Burr does well is the way the secrets of multiple characters are revealed. These tidbits are leached out in such a manner they sneak up on the reader like a stealth missile.

Wake is highly recommended to fans of Garry Disher and television programs such as the *Mystery Road* series.

Reviewed by Eric Ellis



You’re Invited
Amanda Jayatissa

Amanda Jayatissa has given readers a multi-layered mystery in her latest novel, *You’re Invited*. Set almost entirely in Colombo, Sri Lanka, culture and family play large roles in this story.

Amaya Bloom is invited to Kaavi Fonseka’s wedding in Sri Lanka. Kaavi and Amaya were best friends during childhood and college, but their relationship was broken five years ago. When Amaya learns that the groom is Matthew Spencer (Spence), her own ex-boyfriend, she is determined to stop the wedding. During the wedding celebration week, rumors surface about Amaya, and when Kaavi goes missing, everything points to Amaya. However, secrets abound. Who is behind Kaavi’s disappearance? Will Kaavi get her happily ever after, or is she dead or kidnapped?

Many of the characters in this story are hard to like. Amaya is an unreliable narrator who feels broken, but is somehow determined to stop the wedding. Kaavi is privileged and occasionally curt to others, but when focused on her charity and social media content she comes across as caring, strong,

and independent. Others perceive Spencer to be helpful and charismatic. These dynamic characters transform during the course of the story as various events unfold.

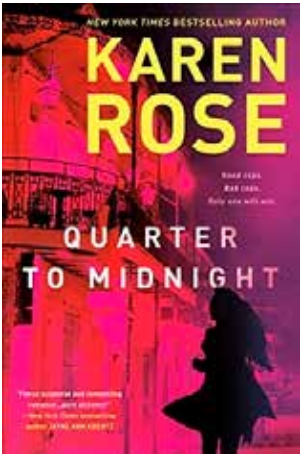
The tale goes back and forth in time from the day of the wedding to three months earlier and several times in between, especially the week of the wedding. The points of view switch between Amaya and Kaavi as well as transcripts of interviews with various guests on the day of the wedding. This may affect the flow for some readers, but the suspense and detailed descriptions of cultural lifestyles and traditions help overcome this.

The story builds momentum with emotionally rich characters, unpredictable moments, a deeply involved plot, and a setting that will be new and interesting to many readers. It has plenty of suspense and a little action, but the intensity is what will keep readers fully engaged. The internal dialogues of Amaya deepen this intensity.

This novel is somewhat unsettling and has many threads woven into the plot. Readers should be aware that besides the bride’s disappearance and presumed demise, there is a focus on family, friendship, how well you know others, control of one’s life, belief in astrology, self-harm, a fixation with lucky numbers, and much more.

Overall, this is an intense novel, complete with a final reveal that has a surprise many readers won’t see coming.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn



Quarter to Midnight
Karen Rose

Quarter to Midnight is the first in a new series by Karen Rose. Set in New Orleans, it takes advantage of both the colorful, flamboyant setting of the city and the dark, deadly swampland surrounding it, which helps drive the story forward with undertones of impending doom.

Retired police officer Rocky Herbert is found dead from a gunshot wound that is assumed to be self-inflicted. His son, Gabe, suspects foul play and turns to his father’s friend, ex-police officer turned private investigator Burke Broussard, for help. Burke knows the police department is a cesspool of corruption, as are the political and judicial arenas in NOLA. So he keeps the investigation under the radar, soliciting only those he trusts with his life to help. Burke assigns his best investigator, ex-marine Molly Sutton, to the case, without first catching the electric undercurrent of attraction flowing between Molly and Gabe. No problem—Molly would never cross that line with a client ... would she?

As Molly digs deeper, she uncovers information about an old case that involved a five-year-old boy, Xavier, who thought he saw a woman murdered in the middle of the flooding from Hurricane Katrina. All these years later, someone is searching for Xavier—desperate to silence him to keep their connection to the murdered woman from seeing the light of day. As the story progresses, bodies begin piling up, dirty secrets come oozing out, and the storyline becomes quite convoluted with suspects and motives. One thing’s crystal clear ... someone in high places is willing to kill to keep his or her dark secret.

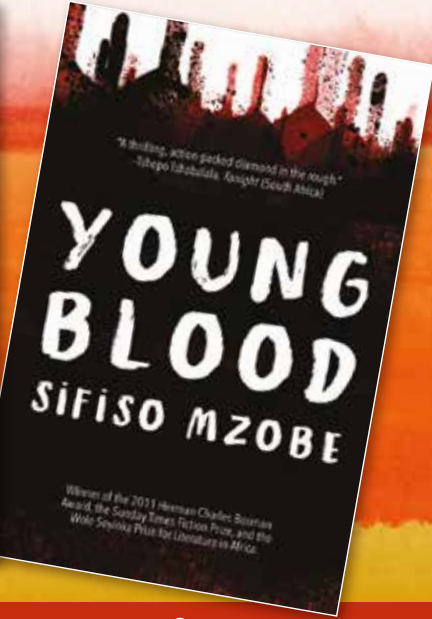
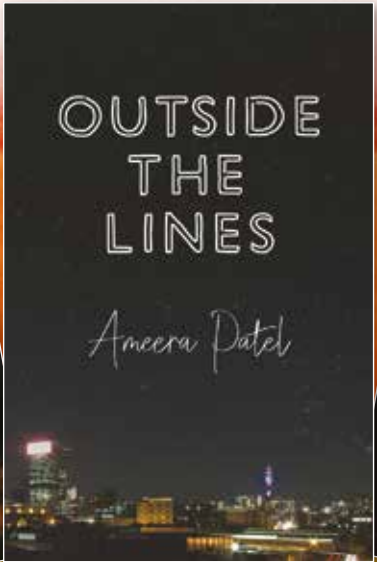
Quarter To Midnight is an intense story of greed, corruption, and abuse of power, but also of love, perseverance, and justice for those who can no longer speak for themselves. There are short bursts of comic relief to break up the intensity, and Rose’s unique blend of romance, suspense, and laugh-out-loud moments goes down as smooth as a cold glass of sweet iced tea on a hot New Orleans day. Molly and Gabe’s chemistry satiates readers looking for the “romance” in romance suspense, and those looking for an intricate crime plot line that will keep them guessing until the end will also feel gratified. Highly recommend to fans of romance suspense and mysteries!

Reviewed by Sandra Hoover



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First Born

Will Dean

Katie and Molly Raven are biologically identical twins, but entirely unlike each other. Katie is outgoing, popular, vivacious, and exploratory, while Molly is an introvert with an OCD-like neurosis regarding her personal safety. Want to know the chances of food poisoning, being killed in a plane crash or hit by a car, or hurt in a fall down the stairs? Just ask Molly and she can tell you—and

in percentages.

For most of their lives, the two have remained inseparable, with an ability to be tuned into each other's every bodily function, including communicating in code.

With Katie being the adventurous of the two, she has moved to New York to further her studies, while Molly has remained in England where she feels it is safe.

After some time apart, with her parents in New York visiting Katie, Molly receives a telephone call from her

father: her twin has died under mysterious circumstances, and Molly needs to come immediately.

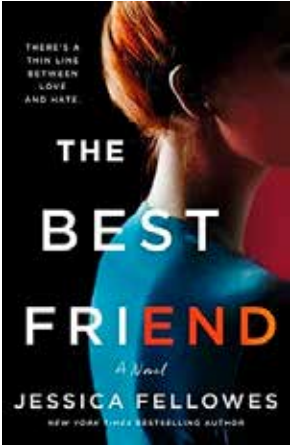
Molly then travels to New York, determined to learn exactly what has happened to Katie and to ensure that if any guilty party exists, punishment will follow.

It's at this point when *First Born* turns into a “police procedural” without the police, with Molly filling the role of a dogged detective, which is normally occupied by police investigators. The novel is not a rapid, page-turning, edge-of-the-seat thriller—at first—but instead a study of the relationship of a pair of wildly different twins, done so with slowly divulged, exacting detail.

Dean reveals a meticulously plotted tale, which includes an expansively detailed examination of Molly's safety neurosis and how it impacts every single moment of her lifestyle, her thought processes, and her relationships with others in this world.

First Born is highly recommended to those who enjoy plots with detail, complex characters, and stories that slowly build until boiling over the top.

Reviewed by Eric Ellis



The Best Friend

Jessica Fellowes

Jessica Fellowes takes her first foray into psychological suspense with *The Best Friend*. Fellowes is known for her historical fiction series *The Mitford Murders*.

From childhood, Bella and Kate have been inseparable. Even though there have been periods where the two have not spoken, they are always drawn back to each other. As Bella and

Kate age, men come and go, and other events change the landscape of their relationship.

The girls have the kind of fraught emotional connection that any female childhood friendship is prone to, with everything from boys to major life events leaving an indelible mark. Although Kate and Bella have very different personalities, most readers will identify with one or the other, and will quickly develop a connection with both. Fellowes is able to formulate strong, relatable characters without substantial character development.

The focus of the novel is on the friendship between the two young women, but throughout there is a hint of something nefarious, something dark, that has forever changed the relationship. Although Fellowes offers breadcrumbs of the event throughout, it isn't fully formed until the very end of the story, and even then the reader is left to connect the dots. The end of the novel answers the questions raised in other areas of the plot, and the deep emotional connection between the characters is understood even more.

Fellowes avoids quotation marks and instead identifies conversations by beginning a new paragraph each time the speaker changes. This makes the novel a very quick read. The plot is easy to follow, even with this unique conversational structure.

The Best Friend examines the intense, co-dependant, toxic relationship of two girls who are turning into women, marked by tragedy, heartbreak, and a deep, dark secret that changes them both. It is a remarkable debut, and readers will be left hoping Fellowes continues to deliver more novels like this in the future.

Reviewed by Erin Clemence

ON SALE AUGUST 2, 2022

The dead will not stay silent.

“A HAUNTING THRILLER...
written across the landscapes of the Navajo Nation and cityscapes of New Mexico.”
—TOMMY ORANGE, author of *There There*

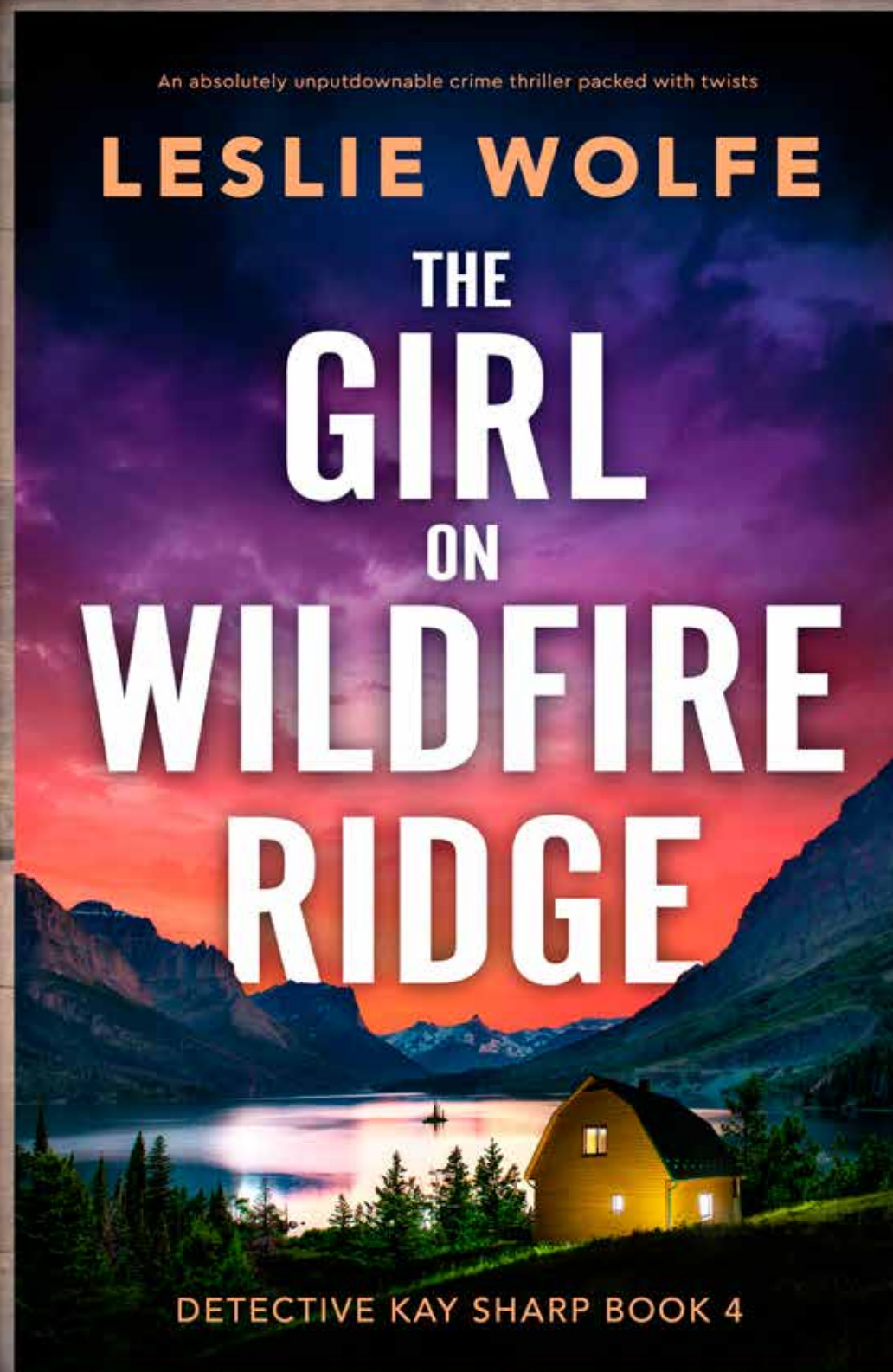
“SOULFUL AND MESMERIZING...
Emerson is a welcome new voice in Native literature.”
—DAVID HESKA WANBLI WEIDEN, author of *Winter Counts*

SOHO CRIME

“So fresh and clever and compelling. I don’t know when I last turned pages so quickly.”
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Harlem Sunset Nekesa Afia

Set in Harlem in the late 1920s, *Harlem Sunset* by Nekesa Afia brings to life the vibrant nightlife, jazz music, dancing, and cultural awareness of the times. It's not just a historical mystery, but also the journey of protagonist Louise Lloyd as she comes to terms with who and what she is. While this novel is the second in the Harlem Renaissance Mystery series, it works well as a standalone.

Louise is the new manager of a club owned by the brother of her girlfriend, Rosa Maria. As they are set to celebrate Louise's birthday, Nora Davies joins them. The friends spend the night drinking and talking, but eventually fall asleep. When they awaken, Nora is dead, and Rosa Maria is covered in blood. Did Rosa Maria kill Nora or did someone frame her?

Afia does a great job with characterization, providing not just a physical description, but gradually showing readers their shortcomings and strengths. Louise is a likeable but

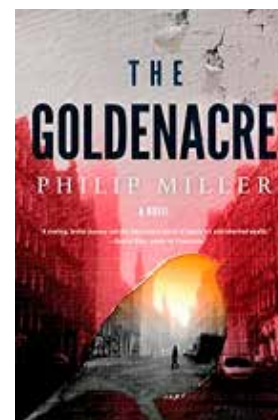
flawed character. She has a need to know the truth, is non-judgmental, tends to joke in uncomfortable situations, tends to ignore things she shouldn't, and suffers from PTSD from earlier events, including her kidnapping. Louise is dynamic, changing and growing as the story progresses. The supporting characters have depth appropriate to their roles.

This story will captivate readers from the very beginning. The plot is multi-faceted, and conflicts move the story forward with twists and turns that gradually build momentum.

Afia does a great job of world-building. Readers will easily be able to visualize the settings, the people, the clothing, and the homes. The atmosphere creates a strong sense of time and place. Afia effortlessly weaves themes of family, friendship, lifestyle, loneliness, the treatment and expectations of women, domestic abuse, grief, and murder into the plot.

Overall, the book is an engaging, captivating, suspenseful, and enjoyable historical mystery and character journey. Reading the series' books in order would further enhance the experience. Readers who enjoy character-driven historical mysteries will likely enjoy this series.

Reviewed by Pam Guynn



The Goldenacre Philip Miller

Edinburg is a very old, very Scottish city. Each city corner has a pub and each pub its own brew. Hopefully this is the exact workplace where a recently disgraced employee of the Civic Gallery of London can restore his reputation.

Thomas Tallis left the Civic Gallery under a cloud. His reputation was suspect; he was forced to sign a nondisclosure agreement and dismissed. He has been sent to authenticate the provenance of a watercolor that will be donated to the Guild, the art museum in West End Edinburg.

Upon arriving at the Guild, Thomas is greeted by the director, Sir Dennis Carter, and told he is to certify "Goldenacre," a much praised watercolor by Charles Rennie Mackintosh. The donation is not a mere acquisition, it is a watershed in the Guild's collection. Sir Dennis needs Tallis to get this job done very quickly, very smoothly, very quietly.

Meanwhile, noted Glasgow artist Robert Love has been brutally murdered in his studio. No suspects. No motive. Any ties to the "Goldenacre"?

Another question: who is donating "Goldenacre" and why? The painting was the property of the late Lord Melrose, who

died eighteen months ago. His estate passed to his two adult children, Olivia and Felix. Lord Melrose willed them Denholm House, the family home, the surrounding property, and all the house furnishings. "Goldenacre" hangs on the bedroom wall of the late Lady of the house. The inheritance also comes with a massive tax bill. Olivia and Felix wish to take advantage of the "Acceptance Instead of Tax" provision of inheritance laws. They stand to receive a credit of twelve million pounds against their tax bill in return for the painting.

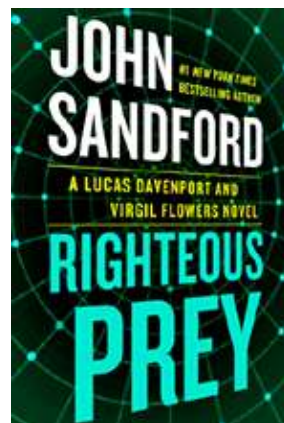
All Tallis wants to do is physically see the painting, authenticate its provenance, and return to London. But strange excuses for not being allowed to see the painting pop up. The quick authentication becomes a negotiation, a missed meeting, a postponement. Why? Are there issues?

A city councilor who blocked the erection of a film studio is murdered. Then there is a strange cocktail party. Sir Dennis keeps insisting that Thomas get on with the task. Is the painting real?

How will this end? Poor Thomas Tallis. So many roadblocks. So many people murdered. So many questions. What will be the answer?

Philip Miller's book is a literary masterpiece. So many layers to peel back in this mystery.

Reviewed by Jennifer Bradford



Righteous Prey

John Sandford

From the murky waters of the dark net surfaces a group of killers who claim to be cleaning America of the worst of society. They target those they despise, people who don't fit into their model of who deserves a place in this country.

First to die is a predatory street crawler who is dispatched mano a mano by one of the gang.

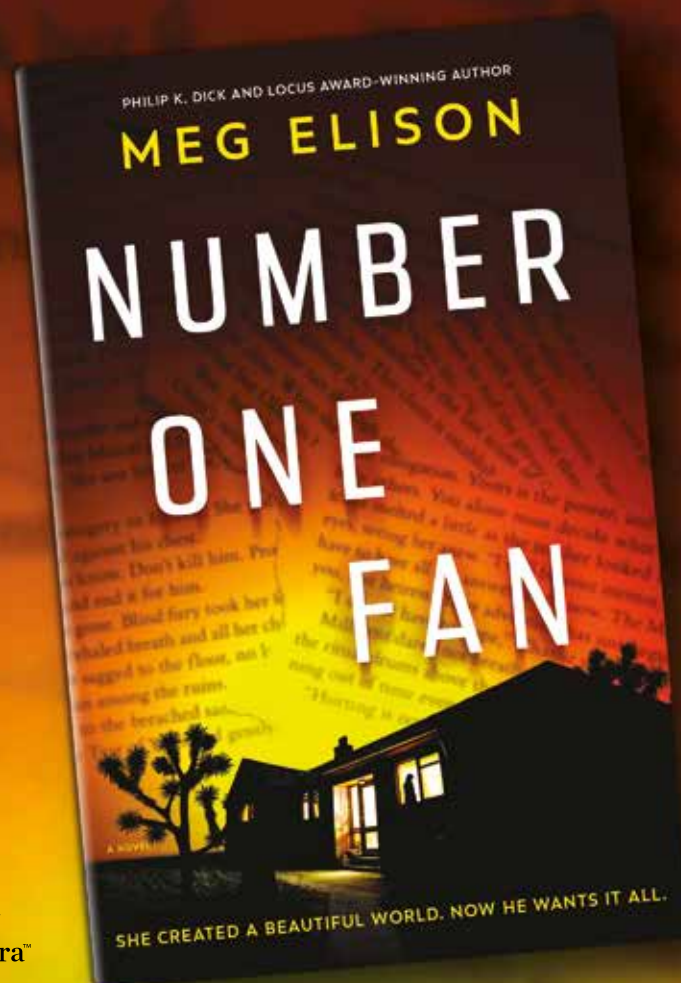
A lengthy press release follows, advising where the body is to be found and promising more of the same. They're calling themselves "The Five." Soon, another diatribe is released, announcing a second killing. Each time a victim is dispatched, the group say they will make a donation to a related charity in the form of untraceable Bitcoin. The bodies are turning up at different locations across the country—victim three is found in Minnesota.

Virgil Flowers, an agent for the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, receives an early morning call summoning him to the scene. On arrival he spots a big lump

leaning against an SUV. It's his ex-boss, Lucas Davenport. These days, Lucas is a U.S. Marshal with political connections. He's been directed to add his practical skills and renowned crime-solving nous to the mix. But there's little to go on; the perpetrators are adept at leaving nothing behind to identify them. Where will this group strike next, and given how little is known about them, how can they possibly be stopped?

Davenport and Flowers are two big, but very different, personalities who bounce off each other brilliantly. Their sharp and witty banter is one of the highlights of this book. As the hunt goes on, the pair carry out a dance with the officers of the FBI, letting the special agents deal with the tiresome research while they knock on doors, sweat people, and generally follow their noses. At heart they're mavericks, enjoying the hunt and the adrenaline rush that goes with it. And something Sandford does very well here—it's a trick he's perfected over the years—is to tell the story throughout from the point of view of both the chasers and the chased. The result is that readers feel they are often a step ahead of the law as the action plays out. It's a careful balance, but Sandford pulls it off superbly. He really is master of his craft.

Reviewed by Andrew Smith



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